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Atty. Gen. Bell Irked By Leaks Of Confidential Information

Griffin Bell has discovered that the United States Department of Justice is about as leaky as a sieve when it comes to keeping confidential information confidential.

The U.S. attorney general from Georgia has warned Justice Department employees repeatedly about leaking stories to the media or to persons not directly involved with pending cases. The warnings apparently have gone unheeded.



On March 18, Bell addressed Justice Department employees to outline his policies and plans for the future. He used the occasion to order a halt to slipping sensitive information to reporters. Bell declared:

"... no case, civil or criminal, is to be tried in the press. Specifically, I oppose leaks of information from any grand jury investigation. Not only does this violate Justice Department rules, often it denies due process."

Bell also has practiced what he preached. When he wanted to discuss a presidential appointee with another member of the Carter cabinet, the attorney general obtained a court order permitting the discussion.

Nevertheless, some Justice employees failed to get the message that leaks are not in vogue in The Judge's department.

On March 31 The Los Angeles Times published a "sources" story saying Bell was not especially interested in prosecution of FBI officials and former FBI men connected with breaking into the homes and headquarters of suspected members of terrorist groups.

A Washington source suggested that the story was leaked by persons "close to the investigation" as a means of bringing public pressure to bear on Bell to go full-speed ahead with the investigation and prosecution of the FBI agents.

That leak is just one of a series Bell and his associates have had to deal with.

There has been a steady stream of information flowing from unknown sources about the Justice Department's investigation of the South Korean CIA and payoffs to congressmen.

Alleged new details of a probe into former CIA director Richard Helms and the CIA role in overthrowing the Allende regime in Cuba were published and caught Bell by surprise. The Justice Department issued a denial of that story.

Mike Egan of Atlanta, the associate attorney general, said recently that he attended a meeting at one end of a corridor in the Justice Department and by the time he got back to his office at the other end, a reporter was calling to inquire about subjects discussed at the meeting.

Of course, not all the leaks are coming from lower echelon Justice Department employees. Much of the information is being fed to the press by defense attorneys, members of Congress and/or their staff members. That seems to be beyond Bell's control.

In addition, a Justice Department spokesman said much of the information that is leaked is not accurate.

Bell, in exasperation over trying to plug up the holes in his information network, said a few days ago that he planned to tell career Justice employees:

"If you must leak something, make sure what you leak is accurate."

One problem with most of the recent leaks is that they deal with unfinished Justice Department business that originated in the era of Atty. Gen. John Mitchell and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.

Bell has tried to make a fresh start in the Justice Department and let as many by-gones be by-gones as possible. But the "confidential source" brigade seems dedicated to keeping the public's attention and, therefore, Bell's directed as much as possible toward the sins of the fading past.